

ON SOME SEMANTIC PROPERTIES OF THE ROMANIAN “AT/TO”

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Abstract: A key property of Romanian Datives is that they can be marked in two distinct ways: inflectionally and prepositionally by the P *la* “at/to”. The two types of marking are dictated by the nature of the determiner which can be variable or invariable and which may or may not realize morphological case. The purpose of this paper is to address two aspects which dictate the acceptability of the prepositional marking in standard Romanian: (a) the animacy/definiteness hierarchies and (b) the singular/plural distinction. Firstly, it will be demonstrated that *la*-datives express sensitivity to both the animacy and definiteness hierarchies (Aissen 2003; Croft 2003 a.o.); in light of this, it will be shown that only nouns high on the animacy scale are felicitous with *la*-marking of the dative because they carry a [Person] specification, while abstract nouns, lower on the hierarchy, are not compatible with the *la*-marking. Secondly, the *la*-marking is sensitive to the definiteness scale where 1st and 2nd person pronouns are infelicitous with the *la*-marking as they are strongly individualised, followed by proper names for they are atomic units. Last but not least, following Corbet’s (2000) singular/plural distinction, *la*-datives are preferred with plural nouns as they are not individualised, as opposed to singular nouns which carry this feature and, as a result, makes them dispreferred

Keywords: *la*-dative marking, animacy hierarchy, definiteness, singular-plural distinction

1. INTRODUCTION

The present article aims at delving into some of the semantic properties of Romanian *la*-datives in ditransitive constructions. One important feature of *la*-datives is that they are *core-datives*; the chief property of core datives is c-selection- core-datives are c-selected and semantically entailed by the V. Core-datives merge low (cf. Moraru-Zamfir, 2023). Therefore, their categorial status can be either DP or PP. Phrases headed by *la* are interpreted as DPs when they can be doubled by clitics (where *la* is interpreted as a functional preposition, while equivalent phrases that cannot be doubled by clitics will be analysed as PPs (where *la* is interpreted as a lexical P, in line with Cornilescu et al. (2017). In light of this, the Romanian *la* “at/to” exhibits a dual status- it is both a (i) *functional dative marker* and also a (ii) *core lexical preposition* with a locative/ directional meaning, with lexical *la* assigning Acc case to its object. In other words, a *la*-phrase is a Dat when it can be clitic-doubled (CD), as shown in (1a,b); the morphology of its complement DP is Acc; yet, starting from the idea that pronominal clitics double DPs, *la*-phrases are considered DPs. It is important to mention that CD is optional with

verbs that select [+Person] complements (1a), but mandatory with unaccusatives.

functional *la*

- (1) a. (Le)-au cumpărat baloane *la* copii.
they.cl.Dat have bought balloons to children
“They have bought balloons to the children.”

lexical *la*

- b. Alexandra a mers *la* mama./ ** mamei.
Alexandra has gone at mother.Acc/ ** mother.Dat
“Mihaela went to mother.”

Romanian exhibits the alternation of nominal constituents marked with Dative with that of PP headed by the functional “*la*”. This alternation is shaped by the following two aspects (cf. Mardale 2008, GOR 2013 a.o): firstly, for DPs with an invariable determiner (e.g. cardinals *la trei* “to three”, *nişte* “some”) *la*-marking is mandatory as shown in (2a) below and secondly, for DPs with a variable determiner case-marking is obligatory as (2b) illustrates (view also adopted in Moraru-Zamfir, 2023). Some constituents (e.g. *cătorva* “some”) allow both types of marking which bear the same syntactic and interpretative properties, but with a stylistic difference: the inflectional marking is specific to standard Romanian while the

prepositional marking pertains to non-standard language (see 3(a, b) below).

- (2) a. Am dat (baloane) la doi copii.
have given balloons LA two children
“I have given balloons to two children.”
b. M-am opus întregului grup.
meRefl.-have opposed entire-the.DAT group.
“I opposed the entire group”
- (3) a. A mulțumit câtorva profesori.
has thanked some.DAT professors
“(S)he thanked some professors.”
b. A mulțumit la câțiva profesori.
has thanked LA some professors
“(S)he thanked some professors.”

As mentioned, the choice between *la*-marking and case-marking is dictated by a morphological property: the nature of the determiner which may or may not realize morphological case. Thus, if the determiner is *invariable* the inflectional dative is replaced by the P construction with “*la*”; this time only the prepositional marking becomes the only option and therefore the inflectional dative cannot be realised.

Let us consider the classes of determiners that dictate the choice between the two types of marking (inflectional/prepositional). As suggested above, for DPs with *invariable determiners*, *la*-marking is mandatory and the only option; interestingly the P *la* “at/to” keeps its original allative value (cf. GOR 2013) (see 4(a-e) below).

cardinal numbers (*doi* “two”, *trei* “three”)

- (4) a. Am oferit (premii) la trei copii.
have offered prizes LA three pupils
“I have offered prizes to three pupils”

indefinites (*niște* “some”)

- b. Am dat (cadouri) la niște foste studențe.
have give presents LA some former students.
“I have given presents to some former students.”

quantifiers (*tot* “everything”)

- M-am adresat la tot plutonul.
MeRefl.-have address LA whole platoon-the
“I spoke to the whole platoon”

emphatic determiners (*însuși* “(his/it)self”)

- M-am adresat la însuși directorul medical.
MeRefl.-have address LA himself medical director-the
“I spoke to the medical director himself.”

adjectives (*astfel de* “such”)

- Nu dau informații la astfel de oameni
Give information LA such people.DAT
“I don’t give information to such people”

For DPs with *variable* determiners, the inflectional dative becomes a mandatory choice, at least in standard Romanian (see 5 (a-e), 6(a) and 7 (a,b) below).

q(uantificational)-determiners (întreg “whole”, fiecare “every”, orice “any”, mulți “many”, puțini “few”, câțiva “some”)

- (5) a. M-am adresat întregului sat.
MeRefl.-have addressed entire-the_{DAT} village
“I spoke to the whole village”
(Mardale 2008: 151)
b. Am oferit flori fiecărei sărbătorite.
Have given flowers every birthday girl.DAT
“I gave flowers to every birthday girl”
c. Am dat sfaturi multor studenți.
Have given advice many students.DAT
“I gave advice to many students.”
d. M-am adresat puținilor studenți
rămăși la conferință.
meRefl.- have addressed few students.DAT
left at the conference
“I spoke to the few students left at the conference.”
e. A telefonat câtorva rude.
has phoned some relatives
“(S)he called some relatives”

articles (un “a”)

- (7) a. M-am adresat unui elev.
meRefl.- have addressed a_{DAT} pupil
“I spoke to a pupil”

demonstratives (acest “this”, acel “that”)

- (8) a. Am dat un premiu acestui elev.
have give an award this pupil.
“I have given an award to this pupil”
b. Am dat o carte acelei eleve.
have give book that pupil.
“I have given a book to that pupil”

Other constituents, such as the q-determiner *câțiva* “some” allow both types of marking (case-marking and *la*-marking), as suggested by Mardale (2008:151).

- (9) a. A telefonat câtorva colegi.
has phone_{PastPart} some_{Dat} colleagues
“(S)he called some colleagues”
(Mardale 2008:151)
b. A telefonat la câțiva colegi.
has phone_{PastPart} LA some colleagues
“(S)he called some colleagues”
(Mardale 2008:151)

In dialectal Romanian, especially in the spoken language, *la*-marking is preferred even in those situations where its presence is not dictated morphologically. Let us consider 10 (a, b) where

pronouns and (b) 3rd person pronouns. The [Person] feature belongs only to first and second person pronouns (I/you) while third person pronouns lack this feature, they are unmarked. To quote Forchheimer (1953: 5-6), third person “remains in the great pool of the impersonal”.

Examples from CoRoLa illustrate that in non-standard language, Romanian *la*-datives occur with third person pronouns, as shown in (17a, b) (cf. Moraru-Zamfir, 2023)

In non-standard Romanian, *la*-datives occur with 3rd person pronouns as examples from CoRoLa illustrate (see (17) below):

- (17) a. ?? (...) dă la ei tot ce ai, poate așa
scapi de necaz (...)
give LA them all have got, maybe this way
you escape from trouble.the
“ (...) give everything you have got to them,
maybe this way you’ll escape from the trouble (...)”
a’. Dă-le lor tot ce ai, poate așa
scapi de necaz.
Give.cl.dat.3pl them all have got, maybe this way
you escape from trouble.the
“Give them everything you have got, maybe this
way you’ll escape from the trouble”

La-datives are illicit with proper names because they are strongly individualized. However, in dialectal Romanian *la*-datives do occur with proper names the examples found on Google suggest (as also discussed in Avram 1997; Iorga 2013 a.o.)

- (18) a. ?? Îi dau rețeta la Maria.
CL.DAT.3SG give recipe.the LA Maria
“I give the recipe to Mary”
a’. Îi dau cartea Mariei.
CL.DAT.3SG give book.the Mary.DAT
“I give the book to Mary”

The literature (Kripke 1972) describes proper names as “saturated expressions” or as “rigid designators”, following the Fregean tradition. One explanation for this would be the very idea that they refer to the same individual in all possible worlds. Following Longobardi (1994), they are analysed as <e> type expressions, with an internal syntactic structure with a definite feature. Being atomic units, strongly individualised, the degree of acceptability with the *la*-dative goes towards the inferior line of acceptability, similar to pronouns.

As suggested in (19a) below, *la*-datives occur with common nouns specified for 3rd person, in the singular, with a referential reading. However, the example in (19b) is preferred in standard language.

In (19c) the demonstrative *ăsta* “this” highlights the referential reading of the noun, thus making the degree of acceptability of the *la*-marking low.

- (19) a. ?? Îi dau o carte la fată.
CL.DAT.3SG give a book LA girl
“I give a book to the girl”
a’. Îi dau o carte fetei.
CL.DAT.3SG give a book girl.DAT
“I give a book to the girl.”
b. ??? Dă la mama revistele.
give LA mother magazines.the
“Give the magazines to mum”
(Avram 2004)
b’. Dă-i mamei revistele.
give CL.DAT.3SG mum magazines.the
“Give mum the magazines”
c. ?? Emite-i un cec la băiatul ăsta.
draw.CL.DAT.3SG a check LA boy this
“Draw a check to this boy”
c’. Emite-i un cec băiatului.
draw.CL.DAT.3SG a check boy.DAT
“Draw this boy a check.”

However specific to non-standard Romanian, *La*-datives occur with collective nouns, also known as “group nouns” (Leech 1989) (*personal* “staff”, *echipă* “team”, *comitet* “committee”, *popor* “people”, *trupă* “troop”, *congregație* “congregation”, *biserică* “church” etc.) with a [+human] reference, carrying a 3rd person specification. As noted by Tănase-Dogaru (2009) collective nouns accept countable quantifiers, determiners, plural markers and plural anaphoric pronouns.

- (20) a. Managerul dă bonusuri la personal.
manager gives bonuses LA staff
“The manager gives bonuses to the staff”
a’. Managerul dă bonusuri personalului.
manager gives bonuses staff.DAT
“The manager gives the staff bonuses”
b. Comandantul dă ordine la pluton.
commander gives orders LA platoon
“The commander gives orders to the platoon”
b’. Comandantul dă ordine plutonului.
commander gives orders platoon.DAT
“The commander gives the platoon orders”
c. Primarul a trimis ajutoare bănești la nevoiași.
Mayor sent support financial LA poor.the
“The mayor has sent financial support to the poor.”

Furthermore, *la*- datives can occur with nouns with [+animate], [-human] features (see 24(a-b) below) and, as the examples suggest they are better tolerated with the prepositional frame, for DPs lower on the animacy better tolerate the *la*-marking.

- (24) a. Fetița împarte mâncarea *la* pisici.
 girl.the shares food.the LA cats.
 “The girl shares the food to the cats.”
 Fetița împarte mâncarea pisicilor.
 girl.the shares food.the cats.Dat
 “The girl shares the cats the food”
 Fetița dă mâncare *la* câțel.
 girl.the gives food LA dog.
 “The girl gives food to the dog”
 Fetița dă mâncare câinelui.
 The girl gives food dog.Dat
 “The girl gives the dog food”.

La is also used with common nouns with a [+human] feature, singular/plural and with a generic, non-specific reading. In contrast to (24a-b) where the nouns have a referential reading, in (25a,b) the nouns have a generic reading and they are situated lower on the definiteness hierarchy; thus, we make the claim that they better tolerate the prepositional construction.

- (25) a. Primarul a oferit haine *la* orfani.
 mayor.the has offered clothes LA orphans.
 “The mayor has offered clothes to the orphans”
 b. Primarul a oferit haine orfanilor.
 mayor.the has offered clothes orphans.Dat
 “The mayor has offered the orphans shelter.”

Moreover, *la* is used with common nouns with a [-human][-animate] features, in the singular/plural.

- (26) a. A pus îngrășământ *la* plante.
 has put fertilizers to plants.the
 “He has put fertilizers to the plants.”
 a’. *?A pus îngrășământ plantelor
 has put fertilizers plants.the
 “He has put fertilizers to the plants.”
 b. A adăugat miere *la* limonadă.
 has added honey to lemonade.the
 “He has added honey to the lemonade.”
 b’. *?A adăugat miere limonadei.
 has added honey lemonade.Dat
 “He has added honey to the lemonade”

One observation is in order here. *La*-datives are endowed with an interpretable [person] feature, which brings about sensitivity to the animacy scale. That is why, functional *la* cannot occur with abstract nouns, because only nouns prominent on the hierarchy, endowed with [+animate] [+person] features are tolerated with the *la*-marking of the dative. In other words, the [iperson] feature represents an s-selectional requirement of the DP *la* combines with and it brings along sensitivity to the animacy scale. Consider the examples in (27a-

b) where *la*-dative cannot occur with abstract nouns, in sharp contrast to the inflectional marking of the dative.

- (27) a. *A supus proiectul *la* atenția organizației.
 has submitted project.the to attention organization.the
 “He submitted the project to the organisation’s attention”
 a’. A supus proiectul atenției organizației.
 has submitted project.the attention.the.dat organisation.the.gen
 “He submitted the project to the board’s attention”

3. CONCLUSIONS

In sum, the present examination has revealed that the P *la* exhibits sensitivity to both the animacy and definiteness hierarchies where *la* is preferred with nouns high on the animacy scale; abstract nouns are infelicitous with the *la*-marking. In line with the definiteness hierarchy, 1st and 2nd person pronouns and proper names are strongly individualised and they are dispreferred with the *la*-marking.

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